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ARTIN SCHONGAUER

BY

MAX GEISBERG

M. KNOEDLER & CO., INC.
14 EAST 57TH STREET
NEW YORK
1928

From the Library of
Frank Simpson

CHRIST AS A GARDENER APPEARING TO MARY MAGDALEN

Size of the original engraving 161 x 160 mm.

"Among his prints I should award the prize to *Christ and the Magdalen*, for here the contents of the composition have received an embodiment, the fervor, depth and delicacy of which have never been surpassed in art."

MAX GEISBERG

From an impression in the possession of
M. Knoedler & Co., Inc.

MARTIN SCHONGAUER

BY

MAX GEISBERG
Director of the Landes Museum, Münster, Westphalia

Translated from the German by
EMIL H. RICHTER

M. KNOEDLER & CO., INC.
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MARTIN SCHONGAUER *by* MAX GEISBERG *is number Two of The Knoedler Booklets. It is translated from the German by Emil H. Richter, formerly Curator of Prints at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. It is reprinted from* THE PRINT-COLLECTOR'S QUARTERLY (VOLUME IV, NO. 2 *pp.* 102-128), *by permission of the publishers J. M. Dent & Sons, Ltd., London, for presentation only, and is not for sale.*

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M. Knoedler & Co., Inc.

January, 1928.

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List of Illustrations

	PAGE
Christ as a Gardener Appearing to Mary Magdalen	*Frontispiece*
The Annunciation	9
Death of the Virgin	10
Christ Taken Captive	13
Christ Crowned with Thorns	14
Christ Before Pilate	17
Christ on the Cross	18
The Entombment	21
The Resurrection	22
The Redeemer	25
Madonna Standing	26
Virgin Seated in a Courtyard	29
Madonna with the Apple	30
St. James the Greater Overcoming the Saracens	33
St. Anthony Tormented by Demons	34
Angel Holding a Shield with a Lion	37
Woman Seated Holding a Shield with a Swan	38
Wild Man Holding a Shield with a Greyhound	41
Wild Man Holding a Shield with a Stag	42
Wild Man Holding Two Shields	43
A Foolish Virgin	45

MARTIN SCHONGAUER

1445?–1491

"Schongauer's productions all breathe a nobility and a perception of beauty which place him among the very greatest masters of the graphic arts."

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BY MAX GEISBERG
Director of the Landes Museum, Münster, Westphalia
(Translated from the German by Emil H. Richter)

THE cheery golden sky which arched over the Italian artists of the fifteenth century, rejoicing in their success and fame, was denied to their German contemporaries. Petty conditions of life — the lack of encouragement and of large commissions, the narrow spirit of the guild — these and many other causes were to blame. Rarely did a man's artistic personality cause a ripple beyond the walls of his native town.

Martin Schongauer, without a doubt the most eminent painter and engraver in the latter third of the fifteenth century, is one of the few exceptions. If we consider that in his lifetime his fame had spread from Kolmar, in Alsace, to Augsburg, causing young Burgkmair, while a journeyman, to seek employment in his workship; if in later years young Dürer wended his way to the upper Rhine with like intentions, it is difficult to believe that it was the paint-

ings alone of Schongauer which carried his fame as far as Suabia and Franconia. It is far more likely that his engravings, numbering 115, and bearing, without exception, the well known mark M ✠ S no sooner left the press than they began their fruitful wandering from workshop to workshop and fair to fair. Countless copies in engraving and wood-cut multiplied their numbers; welcome, inexhaustible sources of inspiration not only to painters and engravers, but to every artisan: to the carver of images, to the brass-founder and glass painter, to the goldsmith and the tapestry weaver, to the faïence painter and to the embroiderer in beads—far beyond the confines of Germany. By means of the multiplying arts he was enabled to exert a far-reaching influence on the art of his time. And, as in Dürer, we find the loftiest flights of his genius in his engravings, not in the few oil paintings which can claim to be authentic.

Among these latter the most important, the life size Madonna in the Rosegarden, at present in the sacristy of the Church of St. Martin in Kolmar, bears the date 1473, thus providing an important item regarding his life, concerning which our information

THE ANNUNCIATION

Size of the original engraving 162 x 112 mm.
From an impression formerly in the British Museum,
now in the possession of M. Knoedler & Co., Inc.

DEATH OF THE VIRGIN

Size of the original engraving 255 x 169 mm.
From an impression on paper with the watermark
Little Bull's Head, now in the possession of
M. Knoedler & Co., Inc.

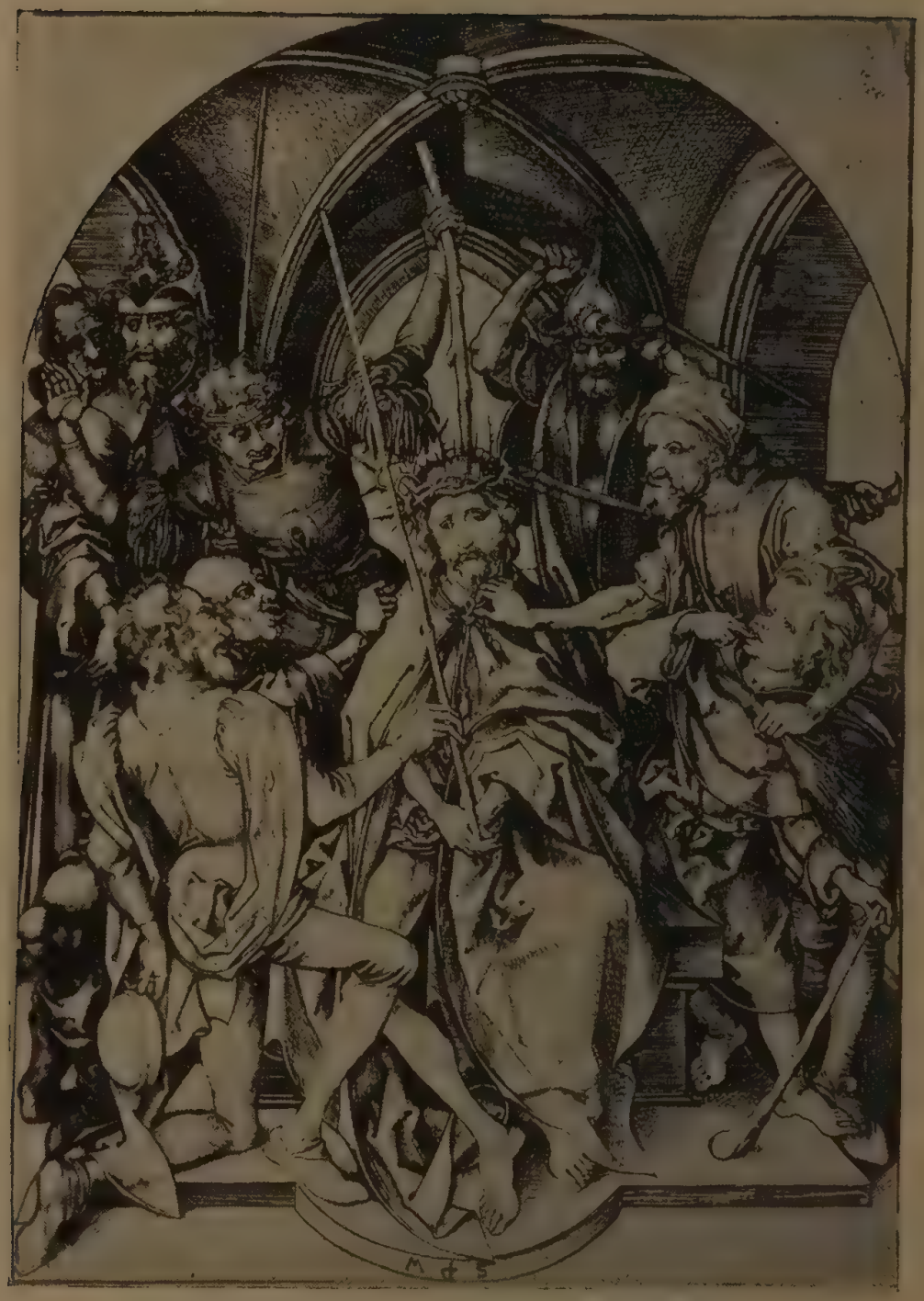
is scanty enough. And yet Schongauer, who so successfully exerted his influence in shaping the vast and speedy development of adolescent engraving, is just the man of whose life we eagerly wish to know more. His father, Caspar, a goldsmith of Augsburg, settled in Kolmar with his wife before 1440, and was formally admitted to citizenship in 1445. Here their son Martin was born, presumably in that same year, or earlier, rather than later. He never married nor did he ever become a citizen of Kolmar. We know scarcely anything regarding his youth and his education. In 1465 he was matriculated at the University of Leipzig, not as a student, most likely, but in some other capacity, possibly as a book-illuminator. His earliest engravings must have been made very soon thereafter, since we know that an engraver from Lower Germany, Israhel van Meckenem, made several copies of Schongauer's monogram, probably about 1468, but surely before 1470, as he then had proceeded in his journeyings from the Upper Rhine into Franconia. It seems reasonable to suppose that this was done with the intention of increasing the sale of his copies by affixing to them a mark well

known to the public. Now the letters in Schongauer's monogram are not always of the same shape; in his earliest twelve engravings the shanks of the M are drawn vertically, whereas they slant in all his later prints. Note that even at that early date Meckenem had already copied the later version of the monogram; it may be well, therefore, to assume from the earliest engravings of our artist a date somewhat earlier than heretofore accepted, say about 1465. The large painting above mentioned was done seven years later. In 1488 Schongauer took up his abode in Brisach, close by Kolmar, and there he died February 2, 1491. Dürer arrived at his workshop a little later, only to find that he had passed away.

If one considers that a man like Meckenem executed over 600 plates in forty years, it would seem as though the twenty-six working years, approximately, of Schongauer, were but imperfectly filled by his one hundred fifteen engravings. Either his activities as a painter were engrossing or, in later years, he no longer handled the graver. Several copies by Meckenem, which for reasons of technique can hardly be dated as late as the eighties, are done after

CHRIST TAKEN CAPTIVE

Size of the original engraving 164 x 116 mm.
From an impression in the possession of
M. Knoedler & Co., Inc.



CHRIST CROWNED WITH THORNS

Size of the original engraving 161 x 113 mm.
From an impression formerly in the collection of Friedrich August II (Dresden), now in the possession of M. Knoedler & Co., Inc.

Schongauer's engravings which must be placed relatively late in his career. In other words, it would seem as though the large majority of the master's plates must have been engraved between 1466 and 1480.

II

Our first sensation in looking at the engravings of Schongauer will be one of strangeness. The manner of presentation has about it something unnatural, unreal, to which we must become accustomed. His saints are pictured with emaciated bodies, with frail spider-like fingers, curls spreading and rigid, garments draped with excessive fullness, folds with wrinkled breaks and edges of the cloth swinging in great curves, veil-ends whipping as in a gale, queerly proportioned figures, with diminutive busts, mincing gait, and timid affected movements. This, together with unwonted forms in the landscape and restlessness in all the elements of the composition, sums up one's first impression. Whoever is familiar with German art of the late Gothic period will realize that these are peculiarities which, in a degree, are common to all forms of art at that time, but he also will

perceive, that in this respect, Schongauer is an extremist outvying others in his devotion to the ideals of beauty current at his time. All his creations breathe a predilection for refinement, gracefulness and excessive richness of form, verging on mannerism. There is little room left for impressive grandeur, simplicity or strong emotion. There is hardly a trace of the wonderful feeling for nature which marks the work of Witz or Van Eyck less than a generation earlier. Nowhere in the landscape of Schongauer have we the sensation of looking out upon the actual world, a feeling evoked by Dürer's smallest picture. The master of Kolmar does not seem to have carried a sketch book when out of doors. How entirely different are his clouds in *Christ bearing his Cross*—the one instance in which they are not conventionalized —from those in the *Apocalypse*. Wherever he has followed nature closely, as in the minute branching of the bare little trees, one sees that he was interested only in the play of lines which he reproduced.

The greatest realism is found in his rendering of animals, and the genius displayed in welding component parts of various animals into living, fantastic

CHRIST BEFORE PILATE

Size of the original engraving 162 x 115 mm.
From an impression formerly in the collection of K. E. von Liphart, now in the possession of M. Knoedler & Co., Inc.

CHRIST ON THE CROSS

Size of the original engraving 162 x 115 mm.
From an impression on paper with the watermark of
Small Bull's Head, now in the possession of
M. Knoedler & Co., Inc.

creatures in his *Temptation of St. Anthony,* is a matter of admiration for all time to come. In contrast with this, the lack of realism in his human figures is all the more striking. He seems to have drawn from life only in his earliest years, contenting himself, later on, with a general command of bodily forms, subjected, in accordance with his ideals of beauty, to radical changes. Portrait-like, characteristic heads, though generally in great favor in late Gothic times, are not to his taste and he uses them—violently caricatured — only in the executioners of the Passion scenes. It is surprising how well this master, who rarely succeeds in correctly drawing a limb with its joints, can, at times, convincingly express the most violent action.

Whatever shortcomings may exist in Schongauer's prints, are outweighed by his inexhaustible creative power. This reveals itself even in his draping of the figures, which, apart from his earliest productions—still reminiscent of the study of the model—assumes the role of a decorative element born of the imaginative resources of the artist. Even the stiffest silk, if draped on the model, will not produce such

a diversified play of fold-hills and veils, fold-breaks, and eye-shaped twists of the cloth. Nor does precisely the same draping occur in any two figures, kneeling, sitting or standing, and doubtless the engravings of Schongauer owed much of their vogue and wide distribution to this versatility. They must have been intended as models for fellow-artists less well endowed with the inventive faculty; there is no other explanation possible for series like the *Apostles* or its feminine parallel—the *Wise and Foolish Virgins*. It is noteworthy that models of drapery, as those in the last-named set, constitute really the only novel theme in Schongauer's prints. Other subjects, such as Saints and Evangelists, fancy armorial designs, ornaments, genre pictures, animal subjects, even designs for goldsmith's ware, all are things which already had been done. But just because of this limitation, the rich inventiveness of the master achieves its greatest triumphs by repeated treatment of the same themes; that of *Christ on the Cross* occurring no less than six times. These versions are identical in their essentials; the same helpless grief in the figures of Mary and John, in Christ an unchanged "tempered piti-

THE ENTOMBMENT

Size of the original engraving 162 x 116 mm.
From an impression on paper with the watermark D
with a double cross, now in the possession of
M. Knoedler & Co., Inc.

THE RESURRECTION

Size of the original engraving 163 x 116 mm.
From an impression on paper with the matermark D
with a double cross, now in the possession of
M. Knoedler & Co., Inc.

ableness" to use Wölfflin's harsh but striking phrase. These pictures illustrate successive stages in Schongauer's development. We see the master busy on the same theme time after time, with the same inexhaustible powers of imagination and the same ease which we have just admired in the draping of garments, always bent on finding some new form of expression, some new and more perfect solution of the problem. In the history of engraving this was an entirely new phase, for in the only analogous case, the *Annunciation* prints of Master E. S., the artist is preoccupied, not with questions of perfection of form, but with matters of perspective. Let us place an earlier engraving, say a late Madonna of Master E. S., side by side with the *Virgin of the Annunciation* of Schongauer. We note that the latter assumes plastic roundness like a statue, against a white indeterminate surface. The lily and the tankard near her seemingly owes its existence to the fact that, as an afterthought, the master decided, for reasons of composition, to let the veil flutter to the right instead of the left, as first intended, and of which faint traces are still discernible. Master E. S., on the other hand, gives us a

glimpse of a cozy chamber, with beamed ceiling, patterned floor slabs, leaded windows, a vaulted altar niche and a house-altar with figured side curtains, in short, an almost endless array of details. The same holds true of the landscapes; the print by E. S., representing *St. John in Patmos,* even shows us St. Christopher in the background, crossing the stream. In a print of the same subject, by Schongauer, a boat and a ship on the horizon are the only accessories, and they are needed to explain the nature of the distant expanse. This elimination of all non-essentials, in which German art of the fifteenth century is usually so rich, should not, of course, be taken as contrasting with his richness of imagination and of form. It is a matter of artistic policy carried out by the master with more and more thoroughness. All the genre-like details, disclosing his astounding powers of observation and of refreshing Teutonic humor, are discarded before long. Brocade, velvet, the spectacles used by the Apostle for tracing the lines while he reads (Death of the Virgin), the small figures in the distance, dogs, lizards, stags and other animals — none of these are found in later plates.

THE REDEEMER

Of the same size as the original engraving
From an impression in the possession of
M. Knoedler & Co., Inc.

MADONNA STANDING

Of the same size as the original engraving
From an impression on paper with watermark Triple Mountain, with full margins (115 x 112 mm.) in the possession of M. Knoedler & Co., Inc.

Schongauer focusses the attention more and more closely, concentrating all his powers on the perfection of the form, according to his ideal of beauty. We need not wonder, therefore, that finally the single figure replaces former groups of figures and exclusively enlists his energies, just as Dürer ends his career with the four grand figures of Apostles and Evangelists. These are tendencies which, in a general way, point unmistakably to Italian rather than German art. The possibility that the Master of Kolmar came in touch with southern influences can certainly not be denied, but an endeavor to guess how this might have occurred would be rash indeed. Were it true we would then have to admit that he remained more staunchly true to his German self than his great fellow-artist in Nürnberg.

Whoever attempts the chronological arrangement of the engraving—undated without exception—of the predecessors of Schongauer, must pay close heed to the increasing power of observation of the different artists, to changes in their rendering of objects, in their perspective and their technique. Nearly all these props fail when we approach Schongauer, the

more so because his prints were produced within a comparatively short space of time. Yet from his artistic evolution we can form, as shown above, a fairly clear idea of his development. In him we see the first *painter* who enters the field of engraving, heretofore an exclusive domain of the *goldsmiths*. To these—with their subtle, painstaking manner, ingrained in them by their craft — engraving owes its purity of style, which consists in using to the best advantage the possibilities based upon and limited by material and tools: Semper's "justification of material." Indeed, these productions of the early period are unequaled to this day and will remain models of style for all time to come; models which must be consulted if graphic art is to preserve its proper technical expression and its purity.

With the advent of the first painter in the ranks of engravers on copper many things which have become second nature to the painter, but which are more or less foreign to the goldsmith, now enter into engraving. One item already mentioned is the stronger assertion of a purely artistic intention in composition; a second is a greater assurance and

VIRGIN SEATED IN A COURTYARD

Size of the original engraving 166 x 119 mm.
From an impression in the possession of
M. Knoedler & Co., Inc.

MADONNA WITH THE APPLE

A portion of the blank paper has been trimmed in this impression. It now measures 161 x 80 mm.
Formerly in the Albertina (Vienna), now in the possession of M. Knoedler & Co., Inc.

greater practice in drawing and in seeing, the habit of study from the model; a third and very important item is a sense of the plastic roundness of the figures represented, a point which the painter commonly endeavors to emphasize with all available coloristic means, to the point of allusion. One need but make a comparison with draped figures of Master E. S. to realize how flat the fullness of his folds appears and how real are Schongauer's figures. It is as though the third dimension suddenly had been revealed in his engravings. It would be unfair to say that the pictorial character of the compositions is likewise a new achievement not in evidence before Schongauer, or that he is the first to remove his figures from the immediate foreground. All these are characteristics of Master E. S. but intensified in Schongauer, thanks to his greater knowledge of perspective, his keener perception of light and shade, and also owing to the plastic element in his figures and the constant striving for unified lighting. He obviously strives to differentiate foreground, middle distance and background by means of variations in the manner of graver work; in his later prints, for

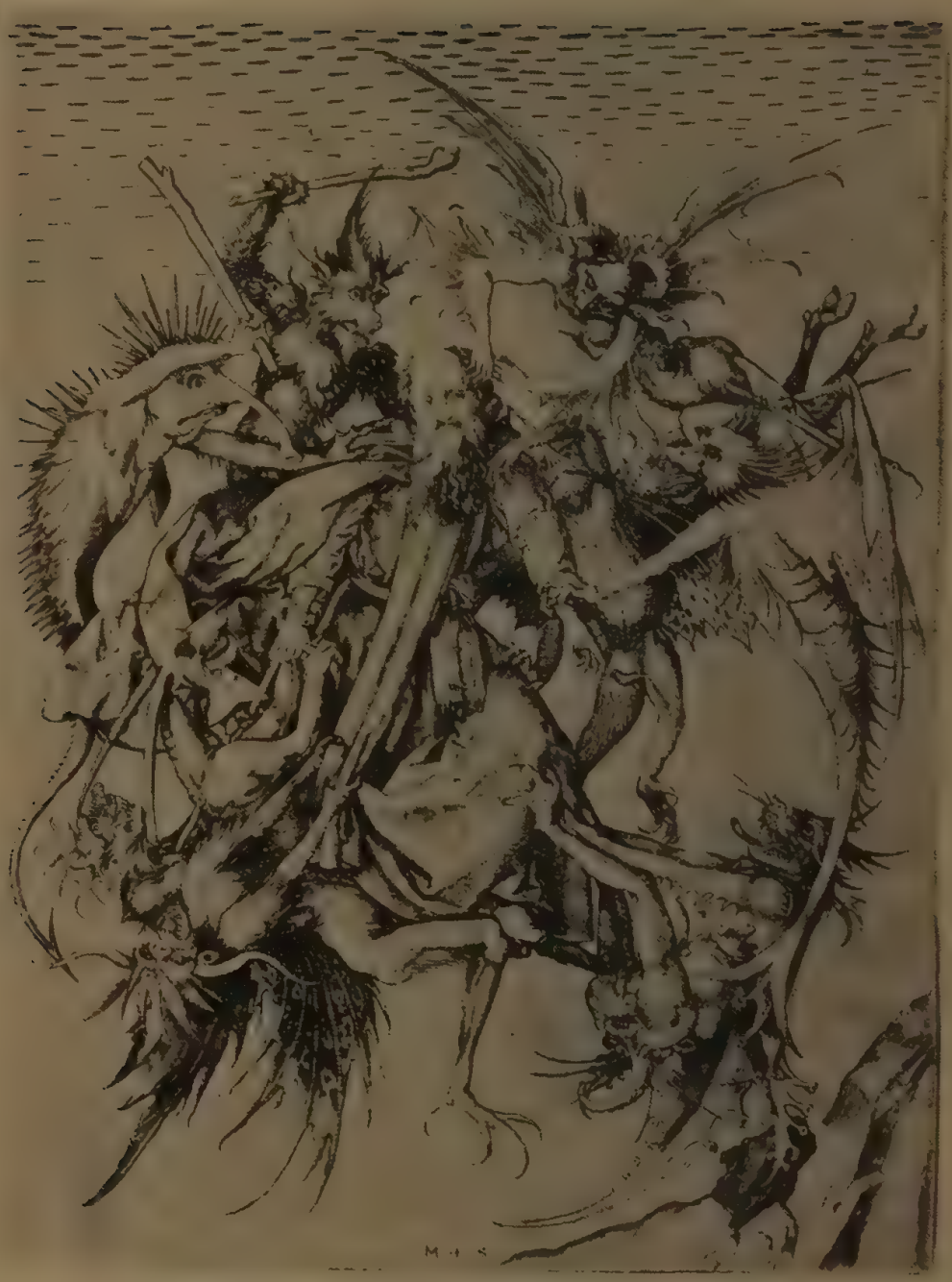
the sake of stronger contrasts, he is apt to eliminate the middle distance.

While color gives to the painter an easy means for contrasting various objects, the only resource which the engraver commands is the scale of tones produced by his system of lines. Schongauer seeks much more definitely than his predecessors to detach the individual figure from its surroundings; he achieves his purpose by toning the background. Furthermore he also attempts to bind together entire groups of figures by means of similar values in tone, and thereby to provide repose and an easy survey of the whole diversified composition. This reveals itself surprisingly in the large plate, *Christ bearing his Cross,* in which it is true, the master has lavished all his strongest effects on the main group in the middle, where Christ is falling under the cross, leaving only a like tone for the background at the left and a lighter one for the immediate foreground at the right. Later on he has succeeded in brilliantly solving similar problems in scenes of the Passion, such as *Christ on the Cross* and the *Entombment.*

Another very curious fact, closely connected with

ST. JAMES THE GREATER OVERCOMING THE SARACENS

Size of the original engraving 289 x 432 mm.
From an impression, formerly in the Albertina (Vienna), now in the possession of M. Knoedler & Co., Inc.



ST. ANTHONY TORMENTED BY DEMONS

Size of the original engraving 312 x 230 mm.
From an impression on paper with the watermark
Gothic P, now in the possession of
M. Knoedler & Co., Inc.

Schongauer's activities as a painter, has never yet been mentioned, strange to say, namely his endeavor to render textures and colors. We are not concerned, just now, with the color illusion produced by association of ideas, the suggestion to the eye of the beholder of certain definite hues, such as black or blue, which is an important innovation of French portrait engravers of the seventeenth century. We refer to a rendering of the relative value of different colors, a discovery heretofore universally claimed for Dürer. In this connection the glittering coat of the kneeling king in the *Adoration of the Magi,* the doublet of *St. Martin,* the pillow in the *Crowning of the Virgin* should be examined. One might also study the shimmering trunks of the birches, the dark garment of Christ, in the *Taking of Christ,* the cloak of the Magdalen in the *Entombment,* and many other instances. I hardly need to dwell upon the fact that Dürer afterwards left his predecessor far behind in both respects, and that he is the first to undertake the interpretation of atmosphere filling and deepening his pictures. The birth of such potentialities, however, is found in Schongauer.

To differentiate between painter and engraver by the terms *artist* and *artisan* most assuredly would be a mistake. In medieval Germany they are synonymous. Yet certain peculiarities which we are pleased to call artistic, are found in Schongauer and his prints. For instance the self-consciousness, unknown till his day, which finds expression in the signing of all his engravings with the initials of his name. The few cases in which we can trace corrections on the plates, viz: the strengthening of shadows, etc., show these to have been guided by artistic considerations, never by the desire to increase the number of impressions the plate might yield, which is a common practice with Meckenem. Schongauer seems not to have printed from his plates after they had reached a certain degree of wear; whatever worn impressions there are, must date from subsequent owners of his copper plates who made capital out of his fame. As a matter of fact, there is even a portrait of Luther with the monogram of Schongauer! While trial proofs of Dürer's prints reveal the careful preparations made for his engravings, the essential outlines of the composition drawn in with the dry-

ANGEL HOLDING A SHIELD WITH A LION

Diameter of the original engraving 78 mm.
From an impression in the possession of
M. Knoedler & Co., Inc.

WOMAN SEATED HOLDING A SHIELD WITH A SWAN

Diameter of the original engraving 78 mm.
From an impression, formerly in the collection of Friedrich August II (Dresden) now in the possession of M. Knoedler & Co., Inc.

point, Schongauer apparently seems to have no such preliminary outline, judging from corrections which were evidently made subsequently on the plates. In the *Resurrection,* for instance, the rise of ground under the Magdalen has only been added to bring the kneeling figure into the foreground. If the hills are covered up with the hand, the figures represented no longer look at each other. In the scene on the *Mount of Olives* one sees a rejected outline of Christ's profile in the air; the position of the angel having made it impossible.

If all the above peculiarities seem due to the fact that Schongauer was a painter, it must likewise be borne in mind that he himself was familiar with the goldsmith's craft. His father, Kaspar, who was living in 1481, as well as three of his brothers, Paul, George and Kaspar, were all goldsmiths, and it seems not impossible that Martin fared like young Dürer, whose father, likewise a goldsmith, first apprenticed him in this craft and gave his sanction to his becoming a painter only after he had learned neatly to practice the craft first learned. That Martin was as familiar with hammer and pincers as with

the brush might well be considered proven by his masterly and workmanlike designs for the Crosier, the Censer, and by the splendid chandelier in the *Death of the Virgin*.

III

A subject of no small importance is Schongauer's technique and the advance in the art of engraving to be ascribed to him. This is not easy to define. Engraving on copper commences with parallel shade strokes, extremely delicate shadings, blending, to the naked eye, into an effect similar to an India ink wash. In the hands of Master E. S. the separate layers of lines become clear, distinct and assume an individual rôle. Cross-hatchings are often found in his plates, but usually there are several layers criss-crossed over each other in the deep shadows. Partial shadows are dissolved into little dashes near the light; the rounding of bodies is modeled by short lines in contiguous rows. In the matter of technique Schongauer, without doubt, is a pupil of Master E. S. who may have lived in Basle or in Strassburg, even though there is no evidence of their having

WILD MAN HOLDING A SHIELD WITH A GREYHOUND

Diameter of the original engraving 78 mm.
From an impression in the possession of
M. Knoedler & Co., Inc.

WILD MAN HOLDING A SHIELD WITH A STAG

Diameter of the original engraving 78 mm.
From an impression, formerly in the William Esdaile, Robert Balmanno, and British Museum collections, now in the possession of M. Knoedler & Co., Inc.

WILD MAN HOLDING TWO SHIELDS

Diameter of the original engraving 78 mm.
From an impression formerly in the William Esdaile, Robert Balmanno, and British Museum collections; now in the possession of M. Knoedler & Co., Inc.

been in personal contact with each other. No trace is found of any influence of the great monogramist in the earliest engravings of Schongauer, the *Madonna crowned by Angels,* the *Small Crucifixion* and the *Man of Sorrows*. In later plates such influences become clearly evident. The strange parallel lines in the sky in the *Temptation of St. Anthony,* increasing in depth toward the top, can only be explained by comparison with two corresponding plates of Master E. S. The posture and forms of Christ, in the early *Crucifixions,* in like manner seem influenced by his predecessor, but, to my mind, the echo of the elder master is nowhere more clearly evident than in the *Madonna with the Parrot,* which is closely related — in facial form — to the latest Madonna pictures of Master E. S. Finally, as we know, there is — among the fancy armorial designs — a Schongauer engraving actually copied after Master E. S., the only copy among his prints. In another figure of that series the costume is of the kind we are wont to find in the engravings of the monogramist.

Schongauer starts out, in regard to technique,

A FOOLISH VIRGIN

Size of the original engraving 147 x 108 mm.
From an impression in the possession of
M. Knoedler & Co., Inc.

from the height to which his predecessor had carried graver work. Thence he, in turn, progresses. With him, for the first time, the lines in their entire length follow the curves of the body; another series crossing the first, indicates the rounding of the form. The transition from dark to light is effected by breaking the lines into little hooks. Extensive use is made of simple, plain cross-hatching, but in the depths of shadow, he is obliged to add a third, fourth and additional series of shading strokes.

However consciously he may differentiate the strength of his graver lines (for instance, in fore- and background), the idea never occurs to him to infuse dynamic differences into each separate stroke; that was a stride in technical development reserved for his heir.

Schongauer's productions all breathe a nobility and a perception of beauty which place him among the very greatest masters of the graphic arts. Among his prints I should award the prize to *Christ and the Magdalen;* for here the contents of the composition have received an embodiment, the fervor, depth and delicacy of which have never been surpassed in art.

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